

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church
Nikolski - ALUTIAN ISLANDS
Alaska

HABS No. AK-69

HABS
AK,
I-NIKO,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-69

HABS
AK
1-NIKO,
2-

Location: Nikolski, Umnak Island, Fox Island group of the Aleutian Chain, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. The Nikolski church is well composed, with gable-roofed sanctuary and narthex flanking a hip-roofed nave. The interior has a remarkable amount of carving, distinguishing this church among Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1930.
2. Architect, builder: Not known. Sergei Sovoroff is credited with much of the spectacular carving on the interior. Sergei and Joseph Krukoff carved the royal doors.
3. Original plans and construction: The nave had a flat ceiling below its hipped roof. Sanctuary and narthex have gable roofs. There is a square belltower in the front.
4. Alterations and additions: The decorative carving was done gradually, probably over several decades. After the Second World War, the ceiling was braced in the nave, then enclosed to give the ceiling its current coved appearance.

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

John Kriukov, a Russian who spent forty years in Alaska, directed construction of a chapel here in 1806.¹ Veniaminov (later Bp. Innocent) designed a new chapel for the village. Built of driftwood, it was consecrated in 1828.² Another church may have been built in the late nineteenth century, but the chronology and locations are unclear.

¹Paul D. Garrett, St. Innocent: Apostle to America (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 64.

²Garrett, 87.

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH
HABS No. AK-69 (Page 2)

The church just previous to the present one, and built on the same site, was long, with a gable roof turning to hipped over the sanctuary. In the front, the gable roof extended to cover the belfry, which was open underneath to form the porch.³ A previous church was located on a nearby hill, its site now marked by a shrine.

In the early 1880s, the population of Nikolski was 117 Aleuts, 8 creoles, and 2 whites, and it was noted that "they support their chapel."⁴

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church, with a rich collection of ornamental carving, has a hip-roofed nave flanked by gable-roofed sanctuary and narthex. Entrance is through a square belltower on the front.
2. Condition of fabric: fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The nave measures 28'-7" x 34'-5". The sanctuary on the east measures 24'-7" x 12'-2", and the narthex on the west measures 24'-7" x 8'-1". The belltower on the west front measures 12'-5" x 12'-3".
2. Foundations: concrete blocks.
3. Walls: The walls are covered with cement asbestos shingles, and the sanctuary is covered with T1-11 siding.
4. Structural system: wood frame.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The double doors in the west front have segmentally arched openings. There are single doors on the sides of the belltower.
 - b. Windows: The windows have six-over-six-light sash. There are round-arched windows at the second level of the west end of the nave.

³See Early Views, III.A., below.

⁴Ivan Petroff, Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1884), 21, 23.

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH
HABS No. AK-69 (Page 3)

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The nave has a hipped roof, and the sanctuary and narthex have gable roofs. The belltower has a pyramidal roof. All are covered with wood shingles, painted blue.
- b. Cupola: There is a small octagonal cupola at the peak of the hipped roof, topped by an onion dome.
- c. Belltower: The two-story belltower is topped by an octagonal cupola and onion dome.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is an open space, with a second-level balcony at the west end. The sanctuary is on the east, separated from the nave by the iconostas. The narthex is on the west, and contains a closet and a stairway to the balcony. Entrance is through the vestibule in the base of the belltower, which has a doorway in every wall.
2. Stairways: There is a three-step amvon, with a semi-circular projection in the center, and krilos along the sides. The stairway to the balcony has a three-quarter turn.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are finished with horizontal narrow beaded boards, and a handrail at the 3'-3" height. The 17'-3"-high ceiling is a slightly rounded tray ceiling, finished with planks. The narthex and vestibule have plank walls.
4. Doorways: The double doors between the vestibule and narthex, and between the narthex and nave, are segmentally arched with frosted glass in the upper portion. The doorway at the back of the nave is framed with molded pilasters with maltese crosses at the top.
5. Decorative features: The interior displays impressive carving. The iconostas is divided both vertically and horizontally by box columns. There is a small balustrade above the iconostas, incisework on the doors, and colored lightbulbs in tinfoil sconces on the frame. The balustrades of the balcony and krilos are fat, carved balusters, while those on the warden's desk are smaller. There is a medallion in the center of the nave ceiling, in the shape of a star, similar to that at Unalaska, but here carved instead of painted. From it hangs a brass chandelier. There are carved candlestands, the frame around the icon of the Last Supper, the frame in front of the krilos, and the frames on the deacons doors.
6. Mechanical equipment: The building is equipped with electricity and oil heat.

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH
HABS No. AK-69 (Page 4)

D. Site:

The church sits at one end of the village, near the stream to the lake. There is a fenced graveyard nearby, and additional graves in the yard with the church. The church faces west, with the altar on the east, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Aleut Tales and Narratives Collected 1909-1910 by Waldemar Jochelson, ed. Knut Bergsland and Moses L. Dirks. University of Alaska Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center, 1990. Page 315 has a photograph, taken by Jochelson in 1909-1910 and published in Natural History magazine, July-August 1928, that shows the previous church.

Garrett, Paul D. St. Innocent: Apostle to America. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979.

Kukoff, Feddie, Nikolski resident, interviewed by author, September 18, 1990.

Petroff, Ivan. Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1884.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska, and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
Nikolski
Aleutian Islands
Alaska

HABS No. AK-69

HABS
AK
1-NIKO,
2-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013